

## Considerations for an Informed Group Conscience About Re-Opening Meetings

We know that many members are excited by the prospect of meeting in-person again. There is a temptation to rush to re-open meetings. Intergroup has put together suggested guidelines for your groups to consider when making an informed group conscience about how to re-open safely once our respective jurisdictions allow it.

Your group may want to consider the following draft of guidelines and questions, as you consider opening when government restrictions have been lifted:

### **PROTECTING A.A. AS A WHOLE:**

*“Each group is autonomous,”* we often recite when making group decisions. The second part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Tradition is just as important: *“except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.”* Tradition 1 tells us *“Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.”* **These traditions remind us that we must ensure that our group decisions do not negatively impact our fellow members or A.A. as a whole, and that we as individuals act in ways that ensure our common welfare.** Traditions 1 and 4 are important now more than ever. We have to consider the health and well-being of other A.A. members, as well as protect the positive reputation and goodwill of A.A. in the community.

### **ABIDE BY THE RESTRICTIONS IN YOUR LOCAL JURISDICTION:**

- A.A. must abide by the mandates of local jurisdictions where our groups meet. As an organization and as individuals, we are not exceptions to the law.

### **ABIDE BY THE REQUIREMENTS OF OUR CHURCHES & OTHER FACILITIES:**

- Groups should also be aware of the restrictions and guidelines churches and facilities have in place by state order, as well as each facility’s individual requirements. Here are some of the public health safety guidelines recommended for Faith-based institutions:
  - Limiting the number of people into the space
  - Recommended distancing of 7 feet between individuals
  - Wearing face masks
  - Non-contact temperature taking at the doors (preferred) or voluntary temperature taking at home
  - Sanitizing contact surfaces before and after each meeting

### **CONTACT TRACING**

- [Contact Tracing is a control measure employed by local and state health department personnel as a key strategy for preventing further spread of COVID-19.](#) Public health staff work with a patient to help them recall everyone with whom they have had close contact during the timeframe while they may have been infectious.
- Why should groups be concerned with contact tracing? To ensure that our common welfare comes first, groups that meet in-person should have a contingency plan in place if a member tests positive for COVID-19. This can be accomplished effectively while maintaining everyone’s anonymity.
  - Contact tracers already practice a version of our principle of anonymity. They must abide by HIPAA laws, which means that when someone tests positive for COVID-19,

contact tracers warn others of their potential exposure as rapidly and sensitively as possible, while protecting patient privacy and identity.

- If A.A. members test positive, they do not have to break others' anonymity when talking with contact tracers. Instead they can say they were at spiritual gatherings or community meetings or use another generic term.
- To ensure our common welfare, in-person groups can list attendees by first name and phone number for each meeting. That would make it easier to alert everyone about the potential for infection. Group should later destroy each meeting list after enough time has passed.
- The church or facility where the group meets should also be informed of the person's illness. Likewise, if a person is tested and is awaiting results, we recommend that the group secretary or primary contact alerts everyone at the meeting and notifies the church as well. In the event that a person's test is negative, the group should notify members and the church of that as well so people can be released from self-quarantine. We can do all of this in a way that assure anonymity and is compliant with HIPAA.

#### **HYBRID MEETINGS:**

- Some groups have talked about the possibility of combining in-person meetings with Zoom meetings to form a "hybrid" meeting. If your group is leaning toward this option, here are some considerations:
- Is everyone at the in-person meeting comfortable participating in a video Zoom meeting? Would it be better to disable the video capability but allow the phone function?
- While Zoom meetings \*should not\* be recorded, it is still important that groups abide by the electronic communication portion of the statute to be safe. This means everyone participating in the meeting must give their consent before any electronic communication is started.

#### **CONCURRENT MEETINGS:**

- Some home groups may not choose to create a hybrid meeting and might split into two meetings at the same time: one in-person and one online.
- If your group decides to host concurrent meetings, will they have the same name in the directory and on the meeting list? Or will they become two separate groups?
- Is this a permanent change?

#### **OTHER WAYS TO CARRY THE MESSAGE THAT WE HAVEN'T CONSIDERED?**

Fortunately, newcomers have been getting sober in Zoom meetings. What this pandemic has taught us is that there are many ways to connect—not just locally, but internationally—and there are lots of ways to carry the message. While we all miss meeting safely in person, we have more tools available to us to stay sober. We can attend meetings anywhere in the world; we can invite speakers from afar to chair our meetings; we can attend workshops, round-ups, and other events from the comfort of our homes. Phone and online meetings do not replace the need for in-person meetings, but they've added to all the ways that we can carry the message of hope and recovery to still suffering alcoholics. So, our decisions to re-open should be made carefully and deliberately. A higher power guides us through this process if we ask for help.

#### **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN RESTRICTIONS ARE LIFTED**

1. What will we do with AA materials handled by members pre-closure?
2. How will we safely handle/manage future materials?

3. Do meetings have monies in their budget to purchase replacement materials, if needed?
4. Will we continue to pass the basket, etc. or should it all be done electronically?
5. What about meeting lists passed around for phone numbers to give to newcomers?
6. What about the handing of chips?
7. Will we continue to have a "self-service" treats/coffee table and potluck events?
8. What about the transfer of materials when commitments turn over. For example, the Secretary generally gives the meeting binder to his/her successor.
9. Do we have legal/financial exposure if a member gets sick and sues the meeting? Should attendees sign a release of liability?
10. What's the maximum benefit of our umbrella policy? People are "sue happy" and could claim that the meeting did not follow protocol/safeguards intended to prevent a resurgence or similar virus.
11. Will chairs continue to be set up and put away before & after meetings.
12. What if a meeting attendee is openly sick? Coughing, sneezing, etc. What if they simply have allergies?
13. What about the occasional homeless or otherwise unkept alcoholic who wanders into a meeting?

These suggestions were a collaborative effort of the Baltimore, San Francisco, Chicago and New York Intergroup's. The OIG is following their lead and will be putting together a list of suggested guidelines as well as perhaps a survey, which will go out in the coming weeks, as we get closer to re-opening. We hope that all groups consider these questions and welcome all input!

In love and service,  
Adina M.